

SAN BERNARDINO, CAL.

TELEGRAM

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The Misadventure of Buckley

William F. Buckley Jr., self-styled "radical conservative," is a clever, witty man. But he overreached himself with publication in his National Review of "secret Vietnam documents" that were a hoax.

The purpose, Buckley has said, was to demonstrate that "the Pentagon and the CIA are not composed of incompetents . . . that forged documents would be widely accepted as genuine provided their content was inherently plausible . . . that the challenge in Southeast Asia was an aspect of the global challenge to the West, not a local affair."

To "prove" the points, dispatches were attributed to former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the CIA and others.

The spoof was also aimed at belittling the New York Times, which was the first to publish the now famous Pentagon Papers, classified material that revealed how the U.S. became involved in the Vietnam situation. Buckley said that the idea of hoax occurred while he and his staff were discussing the papers "and the fact that they were ideologically tendentious."

In plainer English, this means that Buckley was accusing the Times of promoting a particular cause, i.e., downgrading the U.S. effort in Vietnam. And his sarcastic remark: "The New York Times has instructed us that it is permissible to traffic in stolen documents. But they have not yet instructed us on whether it is permissible to traffic in forged documents. It is reported that the editors are divided on the issue."

But cleverness does not necessarily signify wisdom. In fact, the clever fellow is apt to be merely that. Buckley has missed two points.

The first is that the editors of the Times undertook publication of the Pentagon Papers with a sense of grave responsibility. Publishing secret material that has not been declassified is something that is not done lightly. And, while the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the right of the Times and other newspapers to publish the papers, the court did not absolve the editors of possible criminal charges for receiving unauthorized documents. The editors were aware of the risks they took.

Secondly, responsible journalism has to be based on facts, not guesses. It may be true that the military and the CIA gave President Johnson good advice which he ignored, as Buckley has guessed, but until the facts are known, his case is weak.

The Pentagon Papers represent fragments of the history of the period, and were so labeled by the Times. If Buckley were a newsman instead of a commentator, he would understand the necessity of digging for the facts to flesh out those fragments -- a task that still remains.

Buckley's stunt was sophomoric, something that could be expected in a college student publication. College students have often had some fun by kicking a hoax around.

But really, Buckley should be past that age. His admirers would have expected something better of him.

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The Buckley hoax

Long the victim of self-idolatry, William F. Buckley Jr. has at last out-Buckleyed himself. The hoax Buckley now admits contriving by publishing so-called "secret Vietnam documents" in his National Review should take care of the Buckley reputation for all time.

Buckley's wide grin, when he admitted pulling the hoax, indicates that he thought his plan was cute. The fact is, however, the July 27 "expose" in the National Review could have, and quite probably may have, seriously damaged U.S. acceptance in foreign circles where such juvenile journalism is incomprehensible and unexplainable.

The National Review "disclosures" went into such totally serious matters as a supposed 1954 U.S. plan for a "demonstration drop" of a nuclear device in Indochina, the closing of Haiphong and Sihanoukville harbors, neutralizing of Communist China's Hainan Island and so on and on.

Anyone with a care for consequences or a thought in his head would look upon such a printed hoax as treacherous, even if it had appeared in a junior high school April Fool edition. To find it in a presumably mature publication of the conservative right such as Buckley's National Review is an insult.

Even worse, however, was Buckley's explanation to a reporter: "If the advice given in the magazine had been followed, we wouldn't be in Vietnam today. The point is that the papers, or something like them, must have been written. Therefore, one concludes that the difficulty was not that the Pentagon and the CIA gave LBJ bad advice, but that LBJ didn't take good advice."

That is quasi-intellectual gibberish from an educated man who should know better. We gather from it that Buckley, by publishing the contrived nonsense in a national magazine, sought to "prove" something. What, not even Buckley seems to know.